

THE DECAY OF THE PROVINCES:
A STUDY OF NATIONALISM AND SECTIONALISM IN
AMERICAN LITERATURE

The last six or eight years have witnessed the development of a new attitude toward American literature. Those once known as "the young intellectuals"—what shall we call them now that the term has fallen into disrepute?—have in many cases re-examined our older authors and found them wanting, with the exception of Whitman, Poe, and one or two others. Even Mark Twain has not come out undamaged from the ordeal of this trial by fire. More recently, the soberer scholars who teach our literature have begun to ask themselves if the time has not come for them to adopt new viewpoints and utilize new methods of approach. Professor Norman Foerster's article on *American Literature* in the *Saturday Review of Literature* for April 3, 1926, is a very significant statement of the newer point of view. It is significant, too, that the American Literature Group of the Modern Language Association has begun to ask, what are the important factors in our literary history? The political and economic historians have put American literary historians to shame.

It is high time we studied our literature imaginatively, with a full appreciation of the various forces that have made it what it is. The present discussion is an attempt to state the part played by certain important historical forces. Our literary history has been largely the product of three influences, foreign, national, and sectional. There have been, first, the tendency to imitate European literatures, especially English; second, the tendency toward the differentiation of American from English literatures—the tendency toward national standards and subject-matter; and, finally, the tendency of American literature to break up into a group of sectional literatures.

I

It is obvious that American literature began as a minor branch—or, more accurately, as several minor branches—of English literature; and only in recent times became a distinct national

literature. It was inevitable that our early writers should be imitative. Our colonial population, as Professor W. P. Trent has pointed out, was made up of those elements which would have produced no literature of importance if they had remained in Europe. Indeed, one might say the same of nearly all later immigrants as well. Our immigrants have rarely come from an economic or cultural level which is productive of literature. We have borrowed as heavily from the English as the Romans borrowed from the Greeks, and with greater reason. London was the literary center of the Anglo-Saxon world until well down into the nineteenth century. The absence, even yet, of a single American literary capital compared to London or Paris has made it easier for this colonial attitude of mind to persist. That it still persists is evident from our attitude toward every British celebrity who visits this country.

The political separation of the colonies from the mother country produced a loud clamor for a national literature, but it did not at once greatly lessen the intellectual dependence of America upon England; and it certainly did not immediately produce a national literature. Finding no native literary tradition of importance to build upon, our writers had to import one. The chief function of our early writers, like Irving, Longfellow, and Poe, was to transplant to a semi-frontier country the literary traditions of the Old World.

On the other hand, the European influence has not always had the effect of making our writers imitative. The American authors who have made the deepest impression on Europe are—with the exception of Poe—just those writers who have been most national in spirit and theme; Cooper, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Harte, Mark Twain, Jefferson, and Lincoln.

European critics have often been quick to discover and encourage a vigorous Americanism and to discourage the following of European literary fashions.

Certain European literary movements, it may be noted, have affected our literature profoundly because certain American tendencies had prepared the way for them. For instance, the American Revolution had something in common with the French Revolution; and tendencies common to both help to explain

why the European Romantic Movement dominated American literature until the time of the Civil War. Again, the shock of the Civil War and the increasing industrialization of American life help to explain why European Realism has found many followers among our later writers. A revolution in methods of transportation and communication has brought Europe closer to New York than Boston and Philadelphia were a century ago; and the World War, by bringing America into a more active participation in world affairs, prepared the way for an increasing interchange of literary influences.

There is one point which those who plead for a native literature have often overlooked: our continent has furnished an abundance of fresh literary materials but nothing in the way of technique. Our writers have always been dependent upon Europe for models of form. Without Scott's novels, we should never have had *The Last of the Mohicans*, nor perhaps *The Scarlet Letter*. For *Hiawatha* Longfellow borrowed the metrical form of the Finnish *Kalevala*. In Taine's *Art of the Netherlands* Edward Eggleston found a suggestion for the method he used in *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*. Owen Wister's first Western story was modeled on a story by Mérimée. And, if we may believe Conrad Aiken, our contemporary poets are as deeply indebted to Europe as any of their predecessors. Amy Lowell, for example, owed as much to Europe as did her kinsman, James Russell Lowell.

II

The train of thought embodied in this article had its origin in an article of Frederick J. Turner's entitled "Geographic Sectionalism in American History", printed in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* for June, 1926. Professor Turner maintains that our historians have neglected nearly every aspect of sectionalism except the slavery issue. He suggests that it would be well for the geographer, the historian, the student of literature, and all others who are interested to join forces and attack the subject again from new angles.

Serious students of American literature have been unduly prejudiced against the sectional approach by the inferior quality

and the provincial bias of existing sectional studies—especially of the South. Yet, as Turner points out, the United States is practically as large as the whole of Europe; and our sections are in many respects analogous to the nations of Europe. Furthermore, until after the Civil War the United States was not so much a nation as a loose confederacy of states or sections in process of becoming a nation. Our literature in ante-bellum days was becoming little more than an aggregation of sectional literatures.

The chronological order in which our literary history is almost invariably studied has its disadvantages not only before the Civil War but after. We gaily skip from Aldrich to Mark Twain, from Cable to Garland, and from Bret Harte to Henry James. The neglected sectional approach would yield excellent results provided always that it were employed with a full realization of national and foreign literary influences. But we do not need any more such studies as Miss Louise Manly's history of Southern literature.

The forces making for sectionalism have been numerous. There were great physiographic and climatic differences among the colonies. Virginia was as different from Massachusetts as Italy from England. The size of the country was enormous, and methods of communication were primitive. Each colony was a unit in itself; it looked to England; and its chief relations with its sister colonies were political and commercial disputes. Inevitably, state consciousness was very strong in all the original thirteen states, North as well as South. Virginia and Massachusetts long thought of themselves as independent nations. Slavery, of course, intensified these divergent tendencies. Finally, the growth of the frontier created a new type of sectionalism which arrayed the West against the East. Ever since the passing of the Western frontier there has been considerable hostility between the agricultural West and South and the rapidly expanding industrial section of the North and East.

In literature, as in history, one notes the importance of certain sections: the South, most provincial in feeling of all the sections; New England, which held the cultural leadership while the South held the whiphand in political matters; the

Middle Atlantic states, in which American literature found its first national expression in Franklin, Irving, Bryant, Cooper, Melville, and Whitman; and, finally, the West, which is so large that it has subdivided itself into various sections more or less distinct. New England and the South yielded to nationalizing influences more slowly than the Middle Atlantic states and the West. In the Middle States, which were of mixed racial and religious tendencies, the American type first appeared. In a recent biography Phillips Russell has called Franklin "the first civilized American". In the Middle States Franklin and Bryant lost some of their New England rough edges. Poe, reared in the South, inevitably drifted there. There, too, we find Walt Whitman, most consciously American of all our writers. Had Whitman grown up in either Massachusetts or Virginia, he would probably have become a very different sort of poet. It was the influence of the Middle Atlantic states, reinforced by the rising West, that made American literature national.

III

I wish I had time to discuss the South, which represents the sectional extreme in our literature. But the South stands too much apart from the central tendencies in American literature. I shall take New England instead, for we are still prone to identify the American achievement in literature with what George E. Woodberry once called "the literature of Harvard College". Let me, however, before I leave the South, refer to Paul Green's scathing review of *The Library of Southern Literature* in *The Reviewer* for January, 1925. And let me quote a sentence from a letter written by a Southern woman, Mrs. Cornelia Phillips Spencer, in March, 1866: "I do not think very highly of American literature even at its best, but Southern literature is the feeblest attempt, the very weakest rinsings." What the South needs now is a few more studies like John Donald Wade's admirable life of Judge Longstreet.

New England is the most interesting part of the United States; it is clearly the most important in our literary history. And yet I believe its importance has been misunderstood, if not

overestimated—particularly within its own borders. In New England the dominant influences have been sectional and foreign; they have not been national. We greatly need a study of New England literature done with the detachment and thoroughly national point of view of James Truslow Adams's three studies in the history of New England.

For a long time New England dominated our literature; only in recent years have our writers thrown overboard as un-American the literary ideals of Longfellow and his contemporaries. New England still to a certain degree dominates our study of American literature. New Englanders and outsiders trained in New England have taught our English and history courses, edited our magazines, and written—and published—our histories, our literary histories, and our biographies of American men of letters. Until recently New Englanders often failed to understand the importance of Western and Southern writers; and they were thought of as national characteristics which were either local or European.

New England, says Frederick J. Turner, was destined by geography to provincialism. It was cut off from the other colonies by the Dutch in New York. Its rivers led the early settlers northward rather than westward, as in states to the south. It was settled by men and women who thought of themselves as a peculiar people, chosen of God, and so superior to the Gentiles in other sections. They saw a Luther or a Calvin in every village pastor. "Thus", says J. A. Doyle, an English historian of the colonies, "in gathering our information from the abundant supply of chronicals which the piety and the intellectual activity of New England have bequeathed us, we are continually at the mercy of a self-deceiving enthusiasm. We are reading not a history but a hagiology."

New England thought of itself as a unit. Hawthorne once said that New England was as large a lump of earth as he could cherish any affection for. "When I was beginning life," wrote Lowell, "we had no national unity, and the only kind of unity we had was in New England, but it was a provincial kind."

In New England, climate, geography, local institutions, and the Puritan inheritance combined to produce a marked sectional

type. I wonder if the importance of the Puritan inheritance in producing this type is not overestimated. Professor Andrews tells us in *The Fathers of New England* that only a very small proportion of emigrants to New England were members of the Puritan churches. The chief motive of settlers there, as elsewhere, was economic. John Adams once gave a Virginia soldier a recipe for making a New England in Virginia—which Heaven forbid should ever come to pass! This is the formula: "town-meetings, training-days, town-schools, and ministers." What, I wonder, would slavery and the tobacco plantation have made of Massachusetts?

If New England was un-American, however, is not that fact a partial explanation of its greatness in literature? Had Boston, Cambridge, and Concord been typical American towns, we should never have had an Emerson, a Holmes, or a Hawthorne. Few if any of our numerous zeniths and Gopher Prairies have produced writers of any importance. New England was one of the first sections to reach the economic and cultural stage in which literature can flourish. The soil was pure and not well adapted to farming—except perhaps for such literary harvests as have been gathered by Emerson and Robert Frost;—but the country was well supplied with water power, harbors, and timber; naturally it turned to manufacturing, ship-building, and to fisheries. By 1830 there were a large number of families with wealth, leisure, culture, and a keen interest in literature. New England had an excellent educational tradition; it inherited a genuine interest in things of the mind and spirit, "I arrived in Boston," says William Dean Howells, "when all talents had a literary coloring, and when the great talents were literary"; and again, he says: "Literature in Boston, indeed, was so respectable, and often of so high a lineage, that to be a poet was not only to be good society, but almost to be good family." What was it in the New England environment that produced so un-American an attitude? None of our present studies explains the matter adequately.

But if New England's variations from the American norm help explain the greatness of the New England writers, do not these variations also account for the contemporary revolt against

the New England tradition as something essentially alien? New England literature was aristocratic, for its leaders distrusted democracy. It was academic, for it was produced largely by ministers, professors, and lyceum lecturers. It was a village literature, with little that appeals to the metropolitan society of to-day. It represented only seaboard New England; the Massachusetts frontier and the region north and west of Boston had little part in it. It almost ignored the West and the South. It ignored the industrial revolution that was rapidly transforming the life of the section. It ignored—and still practically ignores—the thousands of foreigners within the borders of New England. The New England anti-slavery writers did not have curiosity enough to go to the South to see what slavery was like, as, for example, Thackeray did. When New England poets dealt with Western themes, as Longfellow did in *Evangeline*, they too often got their local color from books and pictures. New England looked to Europe. "There were only eastern windows in the houses of the Brahmins." The New Englander knew more of what was happening in London or Paris than of what was going on in Philadelphia or Richmond. I shall let George Santayana speak the contemporary view of the New England renaissance:

About the middle of the nineteenth century, in the quiet sunshine of provincial prosperity, New England had an Indian summer of the mind; and an agreeably reflective literature showed how brilliant that russet and yellow season could be. There were poets, historians, orators, preachers, most of whom had studied foreign literatures and had travelled; they demurely kept up with the times; they were universal humorists. But it was all a harvest of leaves; these worthies had an expurgated and barren conception of life; theirs was the purity of sweet old age. . . . These cultivated writers lacked native roots and fresh sap because the American intellect itself lacked them. Their culture was half a pious revival, half an intentional acquirement; it was not the inevitable flowering of a fresh experience.

It seems at first a little strange that the so-called Concord group—Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne—should be holding their own so much better than the Boston-Cambridge group.

The Concord writers were more national; in them the frontier influence was stronger. Emerson's manners may have been those of the Boston Brahmin, but in his thinking he could find a place for the frontier democracy of Jackson and Lincoln. Thoreau was in closer touch with the frontier spirit still surviving in New England. In him we find a sort of recrudescence of the pioneer spirit, half concealed by Transcendental terms and by numerous allusions to foreign literatures.

The Civil War and the vast influx of foreigners have greatly lessened the provincialism of New England; and certainly no one can say that the living writers of New England are un-American. Even a superficial study of recent literature shows that New England is producing a very large part of what is significant in contemporary literature. In the main, however, few of these writers come from the vicinity of Boston; and they look to New York, as do all our other writers.

IV

The national characteristics of American literature seem to me to have three main sources: first, the racial, religious, and social divergence of the immigrants from the English type; second, the frontier; and, third, the economic or industrial revolution. The first and third factors make also for a cosmopolitanism favorable to influences from abroad.

The ancestors of the modern American were not typical Englishmen: many of them were not English at all. This is obviously true of the present population of the North and East. But, as Professor A. M. Schlesinger has said, "Contrary to widespread belief, even the people of the thirteen English colonies formed the most cosmopolitan area in the world at the time." Professor Schlesinger further suggests that "The fine arts in America have been developed largely by men of mixed blood". Perhaps the admixture of non-Anglo-Saxon blood—Scotch, German, French, Irish, Scandinavian, Italian, Slavic—has had upon the English stock somewhat the effect that the Celtic and Norman influences are supposed to have had upon the stolid Anglo-Saxon in England.

The religious beliefs of the colonists were not those of the

typical Englishman. In general, one may safely say, the bulk of the settlers were nonconformists. This is true of large areas in the Middle and Southern states as well as of New England. The nonconformist tradition is responsible for many of the characteristics of the American bourgeoisie, although the frontier and other national influences have served to differentiate the American from the British Philistine. In a memorable chapter J. M. Keynes tells us that the English representatives at the peace conference did not know how to deal with Woodrow Wilson until they recognized in him the nonconformist clergyman.

The immigrant to America has usually been more aggressive, more ambitious, more restless than his relatives who remained in Europe. Years of this selective process have tended to make the Englishman in many respects more conservative and the American more radical—although American radicalism is of a limited kind. Again, in the settlement of the West one notes that the restless, the dissatisfied, left home while those with less initiative usually remained behind. The British travellers in America have often noted that as they went west from the Atlantic seaboard the American type seemed to diverge more and more from the English type.

The strongest of national influences—although it is now fading—has been the frontier. American historians have found in the frontier the chief explanation of our national characteristics in politics, social life, and in cultural matters as well. The important factors in the frontier influence are the great distance of America from Europe, the absence of many European traditions and institutions, the abundance of free land, which meant unparalleled economic opportunity, and the presence of many nationalities and many shades of opinion on the frontier—which has been our only efficient melting pot. It is the frontier influence that has most effectively differentiated the American from Europeans; it explains why in life and in literature his reactions are different from theirs. The frontier has given the American writer many new themes. It is the dominance of the New England tradition in our literature that prevents our seeing that the frontier is as central a factor in our literature as in our history. The influence of the frontier was in large part

responsible for the American Revolution, which in its turn greatly influenced both our history and our literature. It became, as Carl Van Doren has suggested, one of the three "matters of American romance"; the other two being the Settlement and the Frontier. The Revolution, the product of national forces, became in its turn a great nationalizing force. At first the Revolution seemed to affect only political matters, but it ultimately brought about something like a social revolution as frontier democracy revealed its social and economic implications. Its influence is seen in the struggle of the Federalists and the Democrats so vividly depicted in Bowers's *Jefferson and Hamilton*.

The new national consciousness developed during the Revolution resulted quickly in a demand for a national literature; but the efforts of Freneau, Barlow, and others to produce it immediately were a comparative failure. It was the Romantic Movement, not the outworn literary tradition of the eighteenth century, that gave American writers the technical means for putting the national life into literature. But the political separation from the mother country was followed by a continuous stream of declarations of our intellectual independence from Europe: Irving's "English Writers on America"; Emerson's "The American Scholar"; Lowell's "A Fable for Critics" and "On a Certain Condescension in Foreigners"; Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*; Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad*; Van Wyck Brooks's *America's Coming of Age*. Even Longfellow once pleaded for a native literature.

The Civil War, which abolished slavery, the chief basis of Southern sectionalism, made the nation a political and economic unit that it had never been before. It brought about the birth of a nation. Our fathers said, "The United States *are*"; we say "The United States *is*." For this significant change in grammatical number, the Civil War is primarily responsible. The Civil War took the political leadership from New England and the South and gave it to the West, where national influences were strongest. Nearly all the great leaders on the Union side came from the Middle West. The Civil War gave us in Abraham Lincoln, to quote Lowell's memorable phrase, "the first American."

V

The frontier influence was slower to make itself felt in literature than in politics, for in frontier society there were few writers of any importance. It was only after a long struggle that American literature became national; and it became a national literature largely through what Van Wyck Brooks has called "the sublimation of the frontier spirit".

For a time sectional influences in the West were strong. As the frontier wave passed westward, behind it in the new states a sectional consciousness began to develop. This found its expression in local and sectional newspapers, magazines, literary clubs, and historical societies. The new sections of the West wanted a literature of its own. They had the bumptious provincialism of new states and nations. What they wrote was often crude, raw, and provincial, but it was distinctly more American, for all that, than the writings of the East. Bret Harte tells us that a little group in San Francisco tried to create a California literature. If they did not succeed in that aim, he at least gave a great impulse to that literary movement which Professor Pattee has called "the second discovery of America".

Edward Eggleston, jealous of the literary dominance of New England, tried to prove that Indiana furnished as good material for the novelist as Massachusetts. Hamlin Garland and many others pleaded for a literature of the new West. Our contemporary literature is clearly dominated by the spirit of the Middle West. The advent of the West to American literature is in a sense comparable to the advent of Norway and Russia to European literature. What Ibsen and Tolstoy were to Europe, Mark Twain has been to America.

The West was frankly critical of the new England tradition. It found a half-hearted ally in the Middle Atlantic states—at least it found an enthusiastic ally in Whitman. It found further encouragement in a reconstructed South and in the growing cosmopolitan spirit. It found encouragement also in the European appraisal of American authors.

How did the Brahmins of New England take this insurrection in which the West was the ringleader? They acquiesced in Howell's promotion to the apostolic succession because he was

so thoroughly de-Westernized. But they resented the intrusion of vulgar figures like the pikes, and they resented the deluge of dialect stories and poems that followed. New England made little of Abraham Lincoln or of the new Western humorist, Mark Twain, whom Howells was to describe as "the Lincoln of our literature". Hawthorne did not know just what to make of Lincoln; he thought the president looked like a country school-master—evidently Lincoln's appearance reminded him of Ichabod Crane. Howells tells us that of the Boston-Cambridge group only Charles Eliot Norton and Francis James Child could make anything of Mark Twain. Even Lowell did not warm to him. The best indication of Brahmin attitude toward the rising literary West is found in Albert Bigelow Paine's story of Mark Twain's speech at the Whittier birthday dinner in 1877. Here the custodians of the Brahmin tradition branded Mark Twain's humor as barbarous and sacrilegious. New England was not convinced of Mark Twain's greatness until Europe had proclaimed it.

But the drift of things was against New England. Howells went to New York, and the literary center of American literature shifted about the same time. New York is now our literary capital, but the productive center is perhaps nearer Chicago than New York. In the Middle West, too, so Professor Krapp has recently told us, is to be found the standard American speech. Peace to the ashes of Noah Webster!

The third influence making for nationalism is the economic or industrial revolution. With the passing of the frontier and with the progressive industrialization of the country, American life has become very different from what it was on the frontier or in antebellum New England. The industrial belt of the Northeast has expanded until it includes not only New England and the Middle Atlantic states but also the larger part of the Middle West, and has even thrust itself into the heart of the South and the remoter West. In a sense the West is rapidly becoming a second East, as the South is becoming a second North. A revolution in methods of transportation and communication, has, so to speak, leveled the barriers of mountain and plain, annihilated distances, and brought all sections closer together—perhaps too

close—certainly, if New England and Southern life are to lose their distinctive flavor. Our factories have filled the land with ready-made products of all kinds. Our intellectual life has likewise become standardized. Our schools and magazines keep a kind of lock-step. So great is the tendency to uniformity that even rebel intelligentsia have revolted *en masse* and adopted in wholesale fashion the convention of unconventionality—as if by throwing over the conventions of the *Saturday Evening Post* and adopting those of the *American Mercury* they could really emancipate themselves.

The old sectional consciousnesses are rapidly fading. Except for certain slight and diminishing habits of speech, it is impossible to distinguish a Southerner from a Northerner or a Californian from a Yankee. Instead of the old sectionalism, we now have a growing class consciousness. It is more important to know whether a man whom we meet is a travelling salesman, a college professor, or a bricklayer, than to know where he was born and bred.

The revolution in American life and thought explains why the fathers of our country now seem more like country squires than far-seeing statesmen. It also explains why the earlier writings of New England and the South seem excessively provincial. Ours is the attitude of a cosmopolitan, urban, and industrial community toward a rural and provincial civilization.

The industrial revolution, however, is not a phenomenon peculiar to America. The whole western world sees its sectional and national characteristics fading; we are all becoming more or less stereotyped, standardized. Naturally then, the industrial revolution, which so greatly diminished distances, has brought America closer to Europe. New literary movements from abroad are felt much more quickly than was true a century ago. No wonder the *Dial* of to-day reveals the literary influence of Europe as plainly as the *Dial* of Emerson and Margaret Fuller. H. L. Mencken may be pardoned for thinking the one a continuation of the other.

My plea is for a study of American literature which shall be conducted with the same enlightened comprehension of important factors as our political, economic, and social historians have

shown. We who teach American literature have much to learn from Turner, Seligman, Beard, and Robinson. Twenty or thirty years of enlightened research may bring us studies of American literature comparable to Paxson's *History of the American Frontier* and Beard's *Rise of American Civilization*. But before that time students of American literature must devote themselves to a more thorough and a more imaginative scholarship than characterized nine-tenths of the investigation in that field up to four or five years ago.

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AN OLD SOUTHERN HOME

Within, the dimness of cool, shaded nooks,
The mingled scent of cedar wood and musk
Lingering upon the air. Rows of worn books
Fill all the walls; and in the dreaming dusk
Silver and china fit to serve a king
Star the dark places. Crossed above the door
Hang swords . . . and many a wound has felt their sting!
Phantom dancers glide down the polished floor—
Dim shapes, old memories of long ago
Fill the pale twilight with their muted life;
From the shadows dark eyes seem to glow,
The quiet air with echoes still is rife.

Without, the pageantry of flower and tree,
The magic spell by summer deftly spun
And spite of years still filled with mystery
Of wind-blown branches, golden, shining sun.
And as the day goes softly to its close,
Across the hill all green with young, cut grass,
Beneath a fragrant rain of shattered rose
The wraiths of many long-dead lovers pass.

EDITH TATUM.